



DTH/Andy James

Broadcast team Durham, Heavner and Holliday on the air with Tar Heel sports

WOODY...

The Voice

of the Tar Heels

Play-by-play artist gains his own variety of fame

By NORMAN CANNADA

In the world of sports announcers, Woody Durham is a unique breed.

Fans listen to the radio play-by-play of Carolina football and basketball games by Durham, Bob Holliday and Jim Heavner even while watching the game on TV. He is stopped constantly by youngsters for autographs just as if he himself were a famous athlete. Indeed, Woody Durham is more than a sportscaster; he's a celebrity.

"I was reared a Tar Heel fan," said Durham, a UNC graduate. "I had always hoped that someday I'd be doing the broadcast for the Carolina games."

Durham's dream of becoming the voice of the Tar Heels finally came true in the fall of 1971 when his predecessor, Bill Curry, left for a job in Pittsburgh.

"I had been working with Jim Thacker at C.D. Chesley (television network that follows ACC sports) and had gotten to know many of the ACC coaches through that job. When it (the Carolina job) came open, Dean Smith and Bill Dooley (former UNC football coach) both recommended me."

Now in his ninth season as Carolina's play-by-play announcer, Durham, 38, has become one of the most popular men in his business.

"I've had kids ask me to autograph their programs, and, when I look down at it, there are the signatures of all the players," he said. "It's really flattering that they think of me in the same sense as the players."

Durham, however, is not above being criticized, especially by fans from other schools who think he is too biased toward Carolina. He doesn't let the criticism bother him, though.

"We have a unique situation here with Duke, State, Wake and Carolina so close together, and it's easy for a person from a rival school to think I'm biased," he said. "I think that most people respect the job I do, though. I have never, to my knowledge, been turned down for an interview because of my association with Carolina."

Durham's most memorable games as a Tar Heel sportscaster all involve arch-rival Duke. He mentioned one 1974 basketball contest in particular, in which the Heels rallied from an

eight-point deficit in the final 17 seconds to tie the game on a last-second shot by Walter Davis. UNC went on to win the game in overtime.

"I remember when Walter released the shot, I thought it was going to bounce off the back of the rim and go out," Durham recalled. "I was all ready to report that Carolina had lost, and, when it went in, the only thing that I could get to come out of my mouth was 'Unbelievable!' For weeks after that, people would walk up to me and just say, 'Unbelievable!'"

Durham said Davis, now a star with the NBA's Phoenix Suns, and UNC senior running back Doug Paschal were two of his favorite players.

"Walter was a great basketball player, but he was a nice guy, too. I think Doug Paschal is a prime of example of everything you would want in a football player."

Another athlete who impressed Durham was Phil Ford, now a guard for the Kansas City Kings.

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Woody Durham

"Phil taught me a lot," Durham said. "He was a unique person in the way that he handled stardom. Anytime he was invited to a function, he would usually show up—some of them were events most players wouldn't even think of attending."

In his nine years as voice of the Tar Heels, Durham feels the contributions of freshmen in basketball and the 30-scholarship limit in football have been the greatest forces of change in the ACC.

"When I first came here, freshmen weren't allowed to play varsity, but even when that rule changed, there weren't many who came in and contributed right away," he said. "Later Phil (Ford) and Mike (O'Koren) started as freshmen and now it seems that everybody in the league is getting great contributions from freshmen."

Durham said the scholarship rule, which limited the number of scholarships a school could award each year has improved ACC football.

"I think it is one of the best rules the NCAA has adopted in recent years. The schools have to be more selective now, and it's made the quality of athletes in the conference better."

Durham's family includes his wife of 16 years, Jean, and two sons, Wes, 14, and Taylor, 6, all of whom he says are UNC fans. Each of them, with the exception of Taylor, has accompanied Durham on trips with the Tar Heels, and Wes has attended Dean Smith's basketball camp for the past four summers.

"My wife has always liked sports and both of my sons do, too," he said. She (Jean) usually goes with me on big trips like Hawaii and Europe but not on the short weekend trips."

Traveling is a big part of Durham's job since Carolina plays much of its football and basketball away from Chapel Hill. During his years as the UNC sportscaster, he has traveled to 20 different states and to two foreign countries. While on these trips, the team sometimes will run into former players or play in the hometown of a current player and visit with his family during their stay.

"This year we went to Macon (Ga.) for a game with Mercer, and after the game all of the player's went to see Al Wood's family," Durham said. "There were probably 75 people there and the players had a ball. Now they're all saying that they can't wait to play Rutgers (in New York City) so that they can visit with Mike O'Koren's mother."

In addition to his job as the voice of the Tar Heels, Durham also hosts the Carolina football and basketball shows each season and serves as sports director for WPTF-TV in Durham. Durham took the latter job two years ago after he left WFMY-TV in Greensboro, where he had worked for 14 years.

"To be honest, I felt I had accomplished everything I possibly could," Durham said. "There wasn't a newscast when I came here (to WPTF-TV) so we had to start from the grass roots. It was a real challenge."

Norman Cannada is a staff writer for The Daily Tar Heel.